

How one county is dealing with juvenile offenders

What does law enforcement do when large populations of juveniles, including repeat offenders, become increasingly involved in gang activities? In northern Kentucky, the Campbell County Police Department teamed with the Department of Juvenile Justice to develop a specialized, community-based Juvenile Intensive Service Team.

The program, launched in 2001, has been so successful that the Campbell County Police Department was honored with the Weber-Seavy Award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police. The award is presented annually to agencies and departments worldwide in recognition for promoting a standard of excellence that exemplifies law enforcement's contribution and dedication to the quality of life in local communities.

In 2000, Campbell County looked at recent statistics and noticed much of the crime in the area was being committed by juveniles who demonstrated a decline in attitude and demeanor toward police officers, said Campbell County Chief Keith Hill. In addition, statistics pinpointed a high number of juvenile re-offenders. The department immediately looked at ways to combat these specific problems, Hill added.

The team approach centers on partnering a uniformed police officer with a worker from DJJ to visit the homes of the high-risk juveniles specifically assigned to the JIST program. To be assigned to the JIST program, a juvenile must be a formerly committed, at-risk youth, convicted of crimes involving violence, drugs/alcohol or gangs, according to "Building an Offender Reentry Program: A Guide for Law Enforcement", published by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. To be consid-

ered a juvenile at high-risk, the DJJ considers the age on the first court appearance, prior criminal behavior, prior out-of-home placements, identified school problems, substance abuse and peer relationships.

Louisville and Newport had similar programs in their jurisdictions before the Campbell County program was started, and the city of Covington is involved with one now, said Rob Forrest, Juvenile Services Specialist at the DJJ.

The JIST program was modeled after a Boston program, Operation Night Light, but was tailored to fit the needs of Kentucky. The program helps juveniles transition from state commitment back to their homes and communities. The JIST team makes random visits to juveniles' homes to make sure they are sticking to the limitations and restrictions the judge set in court.

Although "we have quite a few [programs] across the state, mostly it's isolated to urban areas," Forrest said. "That's where it's designed for."

The police department and DJJ entered into a contract outlining each agency's boundaries, Hill said.

The officers gave the DJJ workers training on handcuffing, how to observe surroundings and remain safe in potentially hostile situations. They also let DJJ workers borrow bullet-proof vests, so they could help when needed.

"They trained us on what they're looking for and what they can and can't do, so we knew exactly what each other's responsibilities would be," Hill said. "But we also knew, more importantly, each other's jurisdiction, so we weren't asking each other to do things that they couldn't do." >>



THE JIST OF THE PROBLEM

/Photos by Elizabeth Thomas



juvenile's room for any drug or gang paraphernalia. The partnership is successful because the DJJ workers are allowed to search the room without a warrant, although they have no arrest powers. However, if the DJJ worker finds something, the police JIST team members are able to make an arrest and the juveniles face immediate consequences for their actions.

"[JIST] lets us meet those people who were re-offending at their house and see if there is gang activity involved, what was in their room and who they were hanging out with," Hill explained.

In turn, identifying known associates helps school resource officers know who is involved in gang activity and to watch for problems. While searching juvenile's rooms, officers find different gang symbols or colors and relay those to the school resource officer. Feeding JIST information to school resource officers also encourages the recognition of gang activity in the schools.

"We don't have the Crypts and the Bloods coming here, none of the national organizations," Hill said. "But [gangs] are here, and they have the graffiti signs and their own language and symbols. We're able to recognize it, photograph it and show it to officers and say 'if you see this, this is what you're dealing with.'"

Because officers also serve warrants, some juveniles have attempted to run. One juvenile attempted to get away by jumping out of a two-story window, but few are hostile or put up a fight, Forrest said.

"The problems we usually run into in Campbell County are either kids not home when they're supposed to be or kids with drugs," Forrest said. "Those are the two main things."

By showing up at the juveniles' homes unannounced, police found that many were hanging around adults known for criminal activity and who openly used drugs around the kids. The officers also run any adult's name in the house and check for outstanding warrants

and occasionally arrest adults too.

"You don't want those kinds of people around people you are trying to rehabilitate," Hill said.

JIST has proven valuable in other ways, too.

"We are sometimes able to solve other crimes by just talking with the juveniles," Hill said. "It is helping to rehabilitate those juveniles so that they are not becoming re-offenders and having them successfully move through the system and become a productive part of the community instead of being a criminal."

When first proposed there was some apprehension from law enforcement officers about the scope of the program.

"Officers wondered if they would really be able to arrest anyone," Hill said. "Would they be able to do their job, or just be there to watch the DJJ worker? Everyone was skeptical at first. They saw it as being social work."

"What we found out is that [social work] is part of our job, because it lowers the crime in your community and increases your knowledge of what's going on with the juveniles in your area, and that's a win-win for both your community and yourself," Hill said.

During one home check, Hill recalls, they couldn't find the juvenile but his parents said he was just there. When they looked, they found him in a storage shed at the back of the house, trying to hide his heroin. He was charged with trafficking.

"So, officers got very excited because they were learning things, they were making arrests and solving other crimes just by talking to these kids," Hill said. "We had a zero-tolerance policy. We weren't going to put up with anything and we were going to arrest when and if necessary. It went really well with the police doing police work."

In another incident, police identified a male juvenile as a suspect in a burglary near his residence, but didn't have any proof, Hill said. The juvenile's name was on the JIST list,

allowing the police and DJJ worker into his house where they found stolen items from the burglary.

Officers made 11 arrests in the first year of the JIST program, but by 2004 that number had dropped to only three. In 2001, at the start of the program there were five repeat offenders, by 2004 there were zero repeat offenders. In three years, the charges to juveniles dropped from 137 in 2001 to 56 in 2004, Hill said.

Visitation days are completely random, scheduled for the convenience for the police officer and the DJJ worker.

For the officers, the program is strictly voluntary. None of them are forced to do it, because not everyone likes to deal with juveniles.

If an officer doesn't have a good rapport with kids, they won't be sent on the detail. Participating officers are usually the ones interested in becoming a detective or drug officer. They want assignments that prove they can do more than traffic detail. JIST helps them develop their investigation, communication and observation skills, Hill said.

Since the program started, juveniles' attitudes toward police officers have improved.

"They're starting to understand and they're expecting us now, so they're not being as spiteful," Hill said. "They're still guarded talking with the officers, but they're demeanor has improved and they're not as rude, crude or arrogant."

JIST has also made the juveniles more accountable.

"The kids that know they're on the JIST list are at home, because they know if they're not, they're going to be held accountable and go to placement or go back to detention," Forrest said. "It definitely keeps kids off the street who would possibly be out wandering around or getting into trouble."

The program has made such a strong impact in the county that the juvenile-drug court asked to become a part of it as well.

OFFENDER PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

- Formerly committed at-risk youth
- Convicted of crimes involving violence, drugs/alcohol or gangs

UNIQUE COMMUNITY CHALLENGES/STRATEGIES:

This is one of the few offender reentry programs in the country that specifically focuses on juveniles.

KEY PROGRAM FEATURES:

- Targeted Police Enforcement
- Enhanced Supervision
- Immediate Sanctions
- Transitional Support Services

"We piggybacked off the DJJ program," said Paul Dierig, case specialists with the Campbell County Juvenile Drug Court. "The judge was giving juveniles in drug court certain restrictions, but nobody was going out to check on them to make sure they were following those restrictions."

Officers and drug court representatives now monitor the juveniles on the court's drug program about once a month.

"I think it's helped out tremendously. It shows that these kids better be home when their supposed to be home because they never know when we're coming around," Dierig added.

For more information on how to start a JIST program, contact Chief Keith Hill at the Campbell County Police Department or Robert Forrest at the DJJ. J

◀ DJJ workers can do a search of the juvenile's room during a home visit. They can only search the area occupied by the juvenile; their room, dressers, closet, etc. If any drugs or gang paraphernalia are found, the officer can then make an arrest and the juvenile faces immediate consequences.

>> Abiding by the curfew is one of the main things looked for when visiting a juvenile at home. Workers can also perform drug screens in the home if the JIST team feels it is needed, the juvenile is caught in the act or at a parent's suggestion. If the field test is positive, the sample can then be sent to the lab for a more thorough testing.

"I've caught kids in the act a couple of times," Forrest said. "We've walked in and they're sitting with their buddies smoking"

They talk with the parents and search the